

What is a Sonnet?

From the Italian *sonetto*, which means “a little sound or song,” the sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a **fourteen-line poem** written in iambic pentameter, which employ one of several rhyme schemes and adhere to a **tightly structured thematic organization**. Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

Seeing as how our next unit is on Hamlet, Shakespearean sonnets are an excellent way to acclimatize oneself to the rigours of the Scribe’s dialog.

The Shakespearean Sonnet

The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a couplet** follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end. In Sonnet 130 of William Shakespeare’s epic sonnet cycle, the first twelve lines compare the speaker’s mistress unfavorably with nature’s beauties. But the concluding couplet swerves in a surprising direction:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

***quatrain**= A four-line stanza, rhyming

-ABAC or ABCB (known as unbounded or ballad quatrain), as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

-AABB (a double couplet); see A.E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young.”

-ABAB (known as interlaced, alternate, or heroic), as in Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” or “Sadie and Maud” by Gwendolyn Brooks.

-ABBA (known as envelope or enclosed), as in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” or John Ciardi’s “Most Like an Arch This Marriage.”

-AABA, the stanza of Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

****couplet**= A pair of successive rhyming lines, usually of the same length

Sonnet 30

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd and sorrows end.